



A Family Learning Program

Written Testimony of Solsiree Vega
Parent, New London Even Start Program
Appropriations Committee
February 16, 2016

Dear members of the Appropriations Committee,

Thank you for the opportunity to submit written testimony. My name is Solsiree Vega and I am a former parent of the New London Even Start Program.

My name is Solsiree Vega. In 1993 I obtained my Bachelor's Degree in Puerto Rico. For 7 years I worked for Head Start as a social worker. In September, 2002, I moved from Puerto Rico to New London, CT. I came to live with my sister-in-law, husband and 2 children in a small one bedroom apartment. My husband and I slept in the living room and my two children slept on a mattress on the floor. I found myself in a new place, around a new culture and new language. Not knowing the language or anything about the community I now lived in, made me feel lost and insecure. The transition for my family was very difficult.

After being in New London for about a month, I decided it was important for me to learn the language so that I could communicate. Therefore, in October 2002 I enrolled at New London Adult Education and began to take ESL Advanced classes. At the same time I was introduced to the Even Start Family Literacy Program.

The Even Start Program was a blessing; it became a light in the middle of my darkness. The program gave me the opportunity to have my youngest son in an early childhood education program. He was learning English and meeting and interacting with children his own age while receiving a good education that would prepare him for his transition to Kindergarten here in The United States. The parenting classes taught me how to help my children with their schooling; it gave me the necessary tools to be a good advocate for them. The activities and field trips with my children helped me increase the nurturing bond I had with them. I believe this is the reason why I have a great relationship with my children and keep them involved in community activities and sport teams. The ESL class helped me to improve my English. It gave me confidence and helped me adjust to this country. The program helped me to connect with other resources in the community and to network.

In January of 2003, we were finally able to get our own apartment in a neighboring town. I did not have my own transportation but the program did, so I was able to continue to come to school. After being in school and in the program for a year and half I began helping new students in the program. I found myself translating and helping the other moms connect with various community resources.

By the end of the school year I felt it was time for me to go seek employment in my social work profession. The Even Start program connected me with the services offered through the Department of Labor. They helped me prepare a resume and showed me all the places that I could search for employment. Confident and ready, I began to send out applications to various agencies.

In May, 2004, I was hired by the United Community and Family Services as a Bilingual Parent Aide in their Parent Aide Program which partners with DCF. My job was to provide services to other parents that were like me. I helped them adjust to this country, educated them on the community resources available, and provided them with parenting skills. This became my opportunity to utilize everything that I had learned from the Even Start program in my very own job. I even referred some of my clients to the program.

In 2008, I decided to further my education and applied to the School of Social Work at the University of Connecticut's West Hartford campus. In September of 2008, I began my studies toward a master's degree in social work. In May of 2011, I graduated with my MSW in the area of administration with a certificate in Women, Children and Families.

In April of 2012 once again the Even Start program was a blessing. This time I was offered the opportunity to apply and was hired for a position as a social worker/home visitor. The program that gave me a hand and helped me succeed in life had now hired me as a staff member. Just like a little kid learning to walk, now I was running toward the opportunity. I've been working for the past two years in the program and I love it! Not only am I doing what I love, but I am now a part of that seed that is being planted and helping the parents. Each day I see them growing, overcoming their obstacles and becoming better parents. It is the most rewarding feeling. I love the program!

After working and collaborating with many different agencies I've found Even Start to be one of the most complete programs. The families receive an education, job training opportunities, transportation, social services, home visits, services from a psychologist and nurse, parenting education classes, early family literacy instruction, and crisis intervention services all in one place. As staff we see them graduate with their GED or high school diploma, or as in my case, they learn enough English to become employable. There are no words to express my complete satisfaction in having received the opportunity to be part of this truly fantastic program. I completed the program twelve years ago and then became a staff member for the Even Start Program for a couple of years giving back what I once received. Today I am a social worker for

the Department of Children and Families that continues to see the need for this comprehensive program and refer many families to become involved with the program.

Thank you Even Start.